



Frequently Asked Questions About Pandemic Influenza

OCTOBER 2005

What is an influenza pandemic?

An influenza pandemic is a global outbreak of flu.

There are three characteristics that distinguish a flu pandemic from the seasonal flu outbreaks that occur every year.

- The pandemic is caused by a new strain of flu virus to which people have no immunity.
- The virus is spread easily from person to person.
- The virus is capable of causing severe illness and many deaths.

Flu pandemics tend to arrive with very little warning. This new virus may be a combination of viruses that have not circulated among people for a long time. Most people will have no natural protection or immunity from the new virus. Because of this, the new virus is especially dangerous, and could lead to high rates of illness and death.

What's the difference between pandemic influenza and seasonal influenza?

An influenza pandemic has little in common with the annual flu season that we are all familiar with. During an influenza pandemic, the chances of becoming sick are not only greater, but the disease is more likely to cause more complications and deaths.

Seasonal outbreaks of influenza are caused by viruses commonly known to make people sick. Pandemic influenza is caused by a new virus to which people have no immunity.

Seasonal influenza outbreaks do not disrupt everyday life. But past influenza pandemics have caused high levels of sickness and death, major social disruptions and economic loss.

Have people in the U.S. died during influenza pandemics?

In 1918 the Spanish flu claimed the lives of 500,000 Americans. This was an unusually severe influenza pandemic.

The Asian flu pandemic of 1957 resulted in the deaths of 69,800 U.S. citizens. The Hong Kong flu pandemic of 1968, the least severe of the 20th century pandemics, resulted in 33,800 deaths.

Every year, seasonal flu kills about 36,000 Americans.

Can scientists predict when the next pandemic will occur or how bad it will be?

Influenza pandemics occur about once every 30 years. It is impossible to predict when the next influenza pandemic will occur or how severe it will be. It is also unknown which influenza strain will cause the next influenza pandemic.

Why are public health officials worried about an influenza pandemic?

The appearance and spread of avian influenza (also known as bird flu) has raised concern about a new influenza pandemic. Bird flu has swept through poultry flocks in Asia and is continuing to spread from Asia to Europe.

Public health officials are also concerned that half of the people in Asia who became ill from bird flu died. It is believed that these people came in contact with chickens, turkeys, ducks or their droppings.

There is no conclusive proof right now that bird flu can spread easily from one person to another. But scientists worry that the avian virus could change and spread between people, which could start an influenza pandemic.

How many people are likely to get sick during an influenza pandemic? Would many people die?

It is difficult to predict how many people would become sick or die from an influenza pandemic. But we can say that the amount of sickness and death will be more than what is expected in a typical flu season and will be difficult for all of us to deal with.

Who is most at risk during a pandemic?

Until a pandemic occurs and scientists learn about the particular flu strain responsible for the pandemic, there is no way to know who is at greatest risk.

In past pandemics, the highest rate of illness was among school-age children. But the highest rates of hospitalization and death occurred in people 65 and older.

Is there a vaccine to protect against the virus that could cause a pandemic?

No. A vaccine against a pandemic strain of influenza cannot be developed until a pandemic begins. After the pandemic begins, scientists can identify the strain and begin the process of creating a vaccine to help control the outbreak. Making a new vaccine takes a long time. It is likely that a new vaccine for an influenza pandemic would be in short supply until larger amounts of vaccine could be produced.

Are there any medications that can prevent or treat influenza during a pandemic?

There are several antiviral medications (such as Tamiflu®) available to prevent and treat influenza. These drugs require a prescription from a healthcare provider. The federal government is creating a stockpile of antiviral medications, but there currently is not enough for everyone in the U.S.

Antibiotics, which are used for bacterial infections, are not effective against influenza.

How effective are antiviral medications?

Antivirals are effective when they are taken within 48 hours of symptom onset. The benefit of antivirals is that they reduce the severity of symptoms and shorten the length of time you are sick by about one day. Antivirals can also make you less contagious to others.

What are public health officials in the U.S. doing to prepare for a possible influenza pandemic?

Despite our best efforts, a severe influenza pandemic could lead to high rates of death, disruptions to everyday life and economic loss.

The U.S. government has developed a comprehensive influenza pandemic plan that addresses the development of vaccines, increased surveillance and detection systems, and expansion of the current stockpile of medicines.

Efforts to plan and prepare for pandemic influenza are continuing at the national, state, and local levels.

Is New Jersey doing anything to prepare for a possible pandemic?

Like many other states, New Jersey has developed and continually updates a statewide influenza pandemic plan.

This plan will help guide public health officials in responding to an influenza pandemic. Some of the issues the plan addresses are disease surveillance, vaccine distribution and the delivery and use of antiviral medication.

The influenza pandemic plan will also help New Jersey's medical experts monitor how influenza is spreading, outlines public health methods to control the spread and guide health care facilities to handle excessive numbers of patients.

Does the public have a role in responding to an influenza pandemic?

If an influenza pandemic occurs, the public may be asked to take steps to protect themselves and others.

Public health officials may ask the public to follow directions on isolation, quarantine and vaccination.

Will schools and businesses be closed during an influenza pandemic?

Very early in an influenza pandemic, public health officials might try to control the spread of disease by:

- Using isolation and quarantine
- Closing schools and workplaces
- Canceling large public events

Advice is likely to change as an influenza pandemic unfolds and more is learned, so it is important to stay informed.

Is there anything I can do to protect myself and family from influenza?

Protect yourself from influenza by taking the same steps you would to guard yourself against colds and other illnesses:

- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you sneeze or cough.
- Wash your hands with soap and water frequently throughout the day, especially after coughing or sneezing. Soap does not need to be antibacterial soap.
- Stay home from work or school when you are ill.
- Consult your healthcare provider if symptoms persist or become severe.

These are very simple steps that can have a big impact on slowing the spread of disease. Develop good hygiene habits now before an influenza pandemic starts.

How will I receive important information during an influenza pandemic?

Keep up to date by listening to news and television broadcasts. Follow the advice from public health officials.

Where can I find more information about influenza and influenza pandemics?

The following web sites have more information on influenza and pandemics.

The NJ Department of Health and Senior Services –
www.nj.gov/health/influenza

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) –
www.cdc.gov/influenza